

## Found in Translation: Mackintosh, Muthesius, and Japan

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The leading Japanese architect Isozaki Arata has observed that, 'A Japanese person looking at [Mackintosh's] work is immediately struck by how "Japanese" his designs are. The simplicity needs no explanation. It is amazing how he has grasped the essence of Japanese aesthetics.'<sup>1</sup> Charles Rennie Mackintosh's (1868-1928) 'grasping' of the Japanese aesthetic did not come by chance, nor did it come as the result of a visit to Japan, for he never went there. It was, as this essay attempts to show, the result of the time and the place of his education and experience as an architect – Glasgow, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and his close friendship with a German architect, Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927).

The nearly fifty years of the Meiji rule (1868-1912) saw the development of a close connection between Glasgow and Japan, so much so that by 1914, Glasgow had more Japanese residents than any other city in Britain, apart from London.<sup>2</sup> The connection can be traced back to 1866, when Yamao Yōzō (1837-1917), one of the Chōshū Five, came to work at Robert Napier's shipyard on the Clyde and study at Anderson College. Soon after his return to Tokyo, Yamao, now Vice-Minister of Public Works, helped establish the Imperial College of Engineering and must have been instrumental in the appointment, from the University of Glasgow, of Henry Dyer (1848-1918) as Professor of Engineering and the College's first Principal.<sup>3</sup> Soon afterwards, Dyer was joined by two colleagues from Glasgow, the physicist William Ayrton (1847-1908) and the engineer and mathematician John Perry (1850-1920), and within a few years, it was to Glasgow that graduates of the Imperial College would go for further studies.

From Glasgow, too, came the steam locomotives for the Japanese National Railways and the ships for the Imperial Japanese Navy. In 1873 the lighthouse inspection vessel, *SS Meiji Maru*, was built at Napier's yard and, in 1890, the warship *Chiyoda* at J & G Thompson's. In 1878 Robert Henry Smith (1851-1914), the first professor of Civil and Mechanical Engineering at the newly established (in 1877) University of Tokyo, arranged an exchange of goods between Glasgow and Japan to better

inform his students of the range of products manufactured in a modern industrial city. From Glasgow, therefore, went examples of Scottish wools, sugar refining and Lucifer matches, as well as fire-clay bricks, gas tar and potash.<sup>4</sup> To Glasgow, by comparison, came thirty-one packing cases containing 1,150 items of contemporary art-wares ranging from wood-block print paper to silk brocade and even full costumes. These were exhibited in the Corporation Galleries on Sauchiehall Street and in the City Industrial Museum in Kelvingrove Park.<sup>5</sup> Three years later the Corporation Galleries hosted the Oriental Art Loan Exhibition showing a range of pieces including lacquer-work, Japanese bronzes, textiles and screens, gathered from private collections, the South Kensington Museum and Messrs Liberty's of London.<sup>6</sup> Then early in 1882 the Glasgow-born architect and ornamentalist, Christopher Dresser returned to the city to lecture on 'Japanese Art Workmanship',<sup>7</sup> using as illustrations examples from the exhibition that was attended by some thirty thousand people.

The City's interest in Japonisme was demonstrated when in 1891 the Corporation purchased its first painting, James McNeill Whistler's (1834-1903) portrait of Thomas Carlyle entitled *Arrangement in Grey and Black 2* (1872-73). Being a variation on his earlier portrait of his mother (1871), its asymmetrical composition and muted palette suggested not the bright colours of *ukiyo-e*, the Japanese wood-block prints, but rather the earthy tones of the traditional Japanese house. And so to Japan, in 1893, went two of Whistler's followers, the painters Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864-1933) and George Henry (1858-1943) – two of the Glasgow Boys. Returning after fifteen months with rolled canvasses and a collection of '*Yokohama shashin*' (tourist photographs), their work caused a sensation. One painting by Hornel, *A Geisha*, was hung in 1895 at the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts, the poster for the exhibition being designed by another young exhibitor, Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Mackintosh had been working for the Glasgow architects John Honeyman (1831-1914) and John Keppie (1862-1945) since completing his pupilage with John Hutchison (c.1841-1908) in 1889. In 1883, and concurrent with his pupilage, he had enrolled as a student at the Glasgow School of Art and while there had developed an interest in Japanese art, decorating his room in the basement of his father's house with Japanese prints. This interest was continued while at Honeyman and Keppie where

he became friends with another young architect, James Herbert MacNair (1868-1955). With him and two young women from the School of Art, Margaret MacDonald (1865-1933) and her sister, Frances (1873-1921), he began working in a loose collaboration that became known as The Four. Their designs were first published as 'Some Glasgow Designers and Their Work', by Gleeson White (1851-98), owner and editor of *The Studio*, in July 1897<sup>9</sup> and it was probably this article which brought The Four to the notice of Julius Meier-Graefe (1867-1935), the German art historian, critic, and first editor of the new magazine *Dekorative Kunst*. Published that October, the magazine's inaugural issue carried a sixteen-line article on the Glasgow designers.<sup>10</sup>

Who wrote this short announcement is unclear: it was probably Meier-Graefe, culling what he could from *The Studio*, for the following spring he wrote to a young German architect recently moved to England, Hermann Muthesius, encouraging him to seek out these Glaswegian designers.<sup>11</sup> From June 1887 to December 1890, Muthesius, now a *technischer Attaché* at the German Embassy in London, had worked in Tokyo for Hermann Ende (1829-1907) and Wilhelm Böckmann (1832-1902) where he had been responsible for the building of the Ministry of Justice in Kasumigaseki, Tokyo. Working privately, in 1889 he designed the German Protestant church and adjacent Theological School, one a French gothic design in stone, and the other a Germanic vernacular design in timber and plaster. The church, which was eventually



Hermann Muthesius's first design for the German Protestant Church, Tokyo (1889) – Werkbundarchiv Museum der Dinge Berlin

built in a reduced form in 1896, collapsed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, but the timber-framed schoolhouse survived. It would be wrong to expect to see any Japanese influence in these buildings: the Japanese government did not commission Western architects to build Japanese buildings, and nor did the German protestants. But when Muthesius left Japan at the start of January 1890, he brought with him a collection of Japanese prints and costumes, as well as memories of his three-and-a-half years there.

In response to Meier-Graefe's encouragement, Muthesius travelled to Glasgow in the spring of 1898. The result was the anonymous article entitled 'Die schottischen Künstler' which appeared in *Dekorative Kunst* the following November.<sup>12</sup> Although no record of the visit has come to light, it is apparent from subsequent correspondence that Muthesius met The Four. On 11 May Mackintosh wrote to Muthesius, 'I have delivered your kind message to the Misses Macdonald and Mr McNair – The pleasure of seeing you in Glasgow was ours and we hope that when you come to Glasgow again it shall be a privilege [sic] to see you again.'<sup>13</sup> There developed, over the following years, a close friendship between Mackintosh and Muthesius, so much so that, in July 1900, Mackintosh could write to share with the German some special news: 'We (Miss Macdonald and I) are to be married in August.'<sup>14</sup> As a wedding gift, Muthesius and his wife Anna Trippenbach (1870-1961), sent the Mackintoshes two *Surimono* prints, one by Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) and the other by Utagawa Shigenobu (1826-89). That December, Mackintosh wrote, 'We now have the prints framed and we count them among the most valued and beautiful things we possess. In our white drawing room they are the most perfect note of colour.'<sup>15</sup>

The two *Surimono* prints were placed on the mantelpiece in the Mackintoshes' newly decorated drawing room at 120 Mains Street, Glasgow. The room, which Muthesius later illustrated in his important study of British architecture, *Das englische Haus*,<sup>16</sup> was well suited to this Japanese artwork. Despite being located in a high-ceilinged Glasgow tenement building, the use of a low frieze-rail that, like a Japanese *ranma*, ran across the tall windows had the effect of reducing the room's apparent height. The low-hung ceiling lights and the muslin curtains hanging from the frieze-rail further emphasized the sense



The white drawing room at 120 Mains Street, Glasgow, with Hermann and Anna Muthesius's two *Surimono* prints on the mantelpiece – T & R Annan & Sons

of horizontality. The walls below the frieze-rail were clad in light grey canvas panels framed by vertical wooden strips while those above, and the ceiling, were of white-painted plaster. It was, in its sparse simplicity, as close to a Japanese interior as might be expected from one who had never been to Japan.

Mackintosh's interest in Japan has already been noted. His 1896 'portrait' of Margaret, *Part Seen, Part Imagined*, showed a woman in *kimono* with her dark hair raised in the Japanese fashion. This drawing became the basis for the figures in the mural he designed for Miss Catherine Cranston's Buchanan Street Tea Room in 1896-97. But there occurred, around the time that he came to know Hermann Muthesius, a noticeable change in his architecture. This is best seen in the difference between the two phases of the Glasgow School of Art.

The competition for the new Glasgow School of Art was won by Honeyman and Keppie in 1897. Although Mackintosh was the designer, he was only a salaried employee and it was John Keppie who attended the opening of the first phase in 1899: by the time the second phase went on site in 1907, the firm was Honeyman, Keppie and Mackintosh.

Mackintosh's initial design had encompassed the whole site and provided an impression of the final building, but there were to be substantial refinements made before the second phase was completed in 1909.

The competition-winning design showed, to the south, a simple elevation divided into five bays, three brought forward to the site boundary and two set back. There were few windows here, the studio windows being on the north front, and the eaves of the steeply pitched roof stepped up and down with the bays. High on one corner hung a small glazed conservatory for the Flower Painting Room. It was a straightforward elevation that could be dismissed as nothing more than a response to the design brief and the site conditions. Yet there was a noticeable resemblance to illustrations that had appeared in Edward Morse's 1885 book, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*. Here the drawings of 'Kura in Tokio' and of a 'Street in Kanda Ku'<sup>17</sup> suggest both the articulation of the School of Art's south elevation and eaves-line, and the small conservatory suspended against the otherwise featureless walls. Yet this elevation can be equally understood in terms of traditional Scottish architecture of which Mackintosh was a great admirer. Here the staggered façade bears comparison to Fyvie Castle, Aberdeenshire, which Mackintosh, in a lecture to the Glasgow Architectural Association in 1891, had described as 'as one of the finest and most characteristic castles in the Scottish style.'<sup>18</sup> If there is a Japanese influence in the first phase of the School of Art, it is probably more safely recognised in the timberwork of the main stairs, where the paired floor joists, their ends tapered and rounded, extended to embrace the vertical newel posts. However, such joinery features were, at this time, not unknown and, through the influence of Edward William Godwin (1833-86) and others can be safely attributed to the fashion for Japonisme.

It is with the building of the second phase of the School of Art that the architecture moves from Japonisme to something recognisable, through either replication or reference, as Japanese. The changes, when they came, were clustered around the new west end of the building and comprised, principally, the Library and Studio 58, together with the new east and west stairs, and the Hen Run which linked the new wing to the older parts.



To start with the stairs. The first phase of the School of Art had a centrally placed staircase, which has already been noted, with access corridors running off east and west. The new western addition necessitated additional stairs at the west end that were complemented by further stairs at the east end. Stark and functional, they might have been left as bare stonework or simply plastered, but instead Mackintosh had the walls skimmed with a sand-cement finish interrupted by thin vertical lines of green glazed tiles and square grids of white or coloured tiles in a variety of arrangements. The result, for one who had seen them, would have immediately recalled the sand-rendered walls of the *chashitsu* or Japanese tea-houses and the *mon* or heraldic devices common from Japanese history. In the same way, the high level corridor called the Hen Run, which was added along the south elevation of the building, suggests, with its long screen wall of glazed panels, the *engawa* and *shoji* of the Japanese house. All these features, illustrated as 'Diaper Patterns', 'Plasterer's at Work' and the *engawa*, can be found in Christopher Dresser's 1882 book, *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufacturers*.<sup>19</sup>

The open pitched roof of Studio 58, on the top floor, was designed without mid-level purlins to allow uninterrupted light in from the roof lights. This was achieved by the construction of trabeated structures at either end of the room, each comprising two tapering square posts and, at high level, a series of inter-locking cross-beams which, in one direction, supported the roof and in the other, braced the structure against the gable wall. The effect was of a Japanese *tora* or of the eighth-century Nandai-mon of the Todai'ji at Nara.

However, it was the Library that offered the most completely Japanese space. Like the tea rooms which Mackintosh had designed for Miss Cranston, and his own flat at 120 Mains Street, it was a highly finished interior set within the stone envelope of a larger building. In this, it replicated exactly the *kura*, the fire-proof Japanese storage buildings which, in the Meiji period, were increasingly adapted as additional living accommodation by the insertion of a timber framework and the lining of the space with curtains. The illustration in Morse's book, 'Framework for draping room in kura',<sup>20</sup> immediately recalls the structural framework and suspended, gridded ceiling of Mackintosh's Library where the books

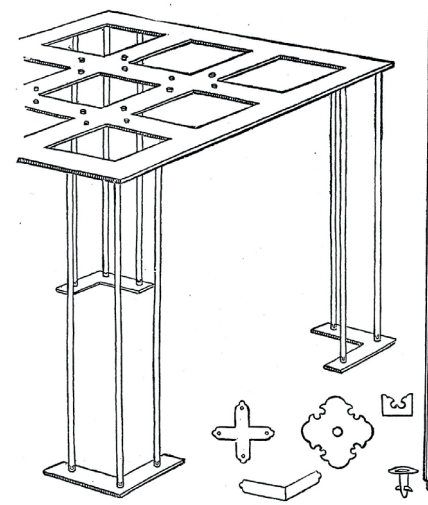


FIG. 138. — FRAMEWORK FOR DRAPING ROOM IN KURA.

Morse's illustration for the framework for lining a *kura* – author's collection



Mackintosh's Library at the Glasgow School of Art (1907-09) – photo: author

line the walls as did the curtains at the *kura*. Another illustration, 'Ceiling rafters supported temporarily',<sup>21</sup> similarly recalls the wrought-iron straps from which the ceiling is hung.

None of these features to which Mackintosh's design appears to refer are the stuff of Japonisme. Despite their appearance in Dresser's and Morse's books, they are abstruse and their interpretation here suggest a knowledge of the real Japan which, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, only one who had seen the country could properly convey. That understanding, I would argue, came from Mackintosh's close friend Hermann Muthesius. Yet we know nothing of their conversations and little of their time together, other than what can be gleaned from the remains of their correspondence. However, their friendship remained close, even after the Muthesiuses returned to Berlin in 1903, for the following year, when their son Friedrich Eckert was born, Mackintosh was asked to be his godfather, something that he was honoured and greatly delighted to do.<sup>22</sup> Eckert, who grew up to be an architect, later wrote, 'No-one expresses better than Mackintosh what a pillar of moral support Muthesius was to him.'<sup>23</sup>

In explaining the Japanese influence on the Glasgow School of



The Library windows at Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art (1907-09)  
– photo: author



A H Mackmurdo's 25 Cadogan Gardens, London (1893) – photo: author

Art, one more feature needs to be considered: the Library's three west windows. Arranged as oriels that extend the full height of the west elevation, these tall, thin windows come in three stages, each segment set within the stone façade and glazed with small panes. Apart from this suggestion of *shoji*, there is really nothing Japanese about them. Attempts have been made to relate them to the three oriel windows at Castle Huntly, Aberdeenshire.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Mackintosh himself observed in his lecture to the Glasgow Architectural Association that at Huntly 'we find a very uncommon feature in the three oriel windows.'<sup>25</sup> However, it is more likely that it was on one of the many visits which the Mackintoshes made to Hermann and Anna Muthesius at The Priory, Hammersmith, that Mackintosh and Muthesius found a precedent for these windows. In the same way that the south face of the Library is clearly derived from Charles Holden's (1875-1960) recently completed Central Library

in Bristol (1906), so this west face must come from Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo's (1851-1942) corner house at 25 Cadogan Gardens, London (1893), now part of the Peter Jones department store.

25 Cadogan Gardens had been built for the painter, Japanophile and follower of Whistler, Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938) but, once the shell was complete in 1893, had been left unfinished internally. In 1896 Menpes took the architect's drawings and traveled to Japan where, as *The Studio* reported, he 'made an especial study of Japanese house decoration and... set himself the task of superintending the construction of a complete range of fittings, each detail of which should not only be designed but actually made by Japanese craftsmen; the whole being so constructed as to be readily taken to pieces, packed, and put together again in London.'<sup>26</sup> Here was an interior that Mackintosh and Muthesius would surely have wanted to see on their architectural jaunts around the Home Counties<sup>27</sup> and it was the result of a fitting out process already familiar to Mackintosh. Although there is no evidence that they visited this building, and it does not appear in *Das englische Haus*, the similarities between its north elevation and the west elevation of the School of Art are so striking, in both form and proportion, that it is hard to imagine that Mackmurdo's elevation was not the precedent for the School of Art.

When the Glasgow School of Art burned on 23 May 2014, the country lost more than an architectural masterpiece: it lost an



The Glasgow School of Art on fire, 23 May 2014  
– photo: Phyllis Buchanan

extraordinary example of the architectural dialogue between Japan and the West. The main spaces which this essay has discussed, the Library, Studio 58 and the Hen Run were all destroyed but, in their rebuilding (which one must assume) reassurance can be sought from the example of the Shinto shrines at Ise. These are rebuilt every twenty years and each time look as fresh and as new as when they were first built centuries ago. In the rebuilding of the School of Art we must not seek to replicate the character that has been lost by artificially ageing it, but to recreate the freshness of what was first there – a new building which was the product of both its time and place, and in many parts the result of a close and special friendship.

## Notes

- 1 Murray Grigor and Richard Murphy [eds], *The Architect's Architect: Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (London: Bellew Publishing and the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society, 1993), p. 77.
- 2 See Olive Checkland, *Japan and Britain after 1859: creating cultural bridges* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. xiii.
- 3 See W H Brock, 'The Japanese Connexion: Engineering in Tokyo, London, and Glasgow at the End of the Nineteenth Century Presidential address, 1980', *The British Journal for the History of Science* 14/4 (November 1981), pp. 227-243; Andrew Cobbing, *The Satsuma Students in Britain: Japan's early search for the 'Essence of the West'* (Richmond: Japan Library, 2000), pp. 64-66.
- 4 See Checkland, pp. 136-137.
- 5 See Ayako Ono, *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and Nineteenth-century Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, Curzon, 2003), p. 21.
- 6 See the catalogue *Oriental Art Loan Exhibition, Comprising Principally the Decorative Arts of Japan and Persia*, Corporation Galleries, Glasgow, December 1881 till May 1882. (Glasgow: Robert Anderson, 1881), pp. 29-31, 41-42, 58-58, *et seq.*
- 7 Reported in *The Glasgow Herald*, 2 March 1882, p. 4.
- 8 Another poster was designed by Herbert MacNair and Frances and Margaret Macdonald. Mackintosh showed his *Design for Diploma, Glasgow School of Art Club and A Railway Terminus – Longitudinal Section* at the exhibition. See William Buchanan, 'Glasgow Art, Glasgow Craft, Glasgow International', in William Buchanan [ed], *Mackintosh's Masterwork: The Glasgow School of Art* (Glasgow and London: Glasgow School of Art Press in association with A & C Black, 2004), p. 141; and Thomas Howarth, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 15-16 and plate 3.
- 9 See Gleeson White, 'Some Glasgow Designers and Their Work', parts 1, 2, 3, *The Studio*, 11 (1897), pp. 86-100, 225-236, and *The Studio* 12 (1897), pp. 47-51.
- 10 'Glasgow — MACKINTOSH ...', *Dekorative Kunst* 1 (October 1897), p. 50
- 11 Meier-Graefe to Muthesius, 17 April, 21 April and 5 May 1898, (Nachlass Hermann Muthesius [afterwards NHM], Deutscher Werkbund Archiv, Berlin). For correspondence between Meier-Graefe and Muthesius, see L A Stein, 'Hermann Muthesius and the German-British Discourse, 1896-1905' in Yōko Ikeda [ed], *Vom Sofakissen zum Städtebau: Hermann Muthesius und der Deutscher Werkbund: Modernes Design in Deutschland 1900-1927* (Kyoto: National Museum of Modern Art, 2002).
- 12 Anon, 'Die schottischen Künstler: Margaret Macdonald, Frances Macdonald, Chas. R. Mackintosh, T. Morris und J. Herbert McNair', *Dekorative Kunst* 3 (November, 1898) pp. 48-49, 69-76.
- 13 Mackintosh to Muthesius, 11 May 1898 (NMH, Charles R Mackintosh 11 May [sic] 1898, Deutscher Werkbund Archiv, Berlin).
- 14 Mackintosh to Muthesius, 12 July 1900 (NMH, Charles R Mackintosh 12 Juli 1900, Deutscher Werkbund Archiv, Berlin).



- 15 Mackintosh to Muthesius, 19 December 1900 (NHM, Charles R Mackintosh 19 December 1900, Deutscher Werkbund Archiv, Berlin).
- 16 Herman Muthesius, *Das englische Haus: Entwicklung, Bedingungen, Anlage, Aufbau, Einrichtung und Innerraum*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1904), pp. 186-87
- 17 Edward S Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1888) 2nd English edition (1st edition 1885), fig. 33, p. 51 and fig. 57, p. 75.
- 18 C R Mackintosh, 'Scotch Baronial Architecture' (1891), p. 31, quoted in Pamela Robertson [ed] *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: The Architectural Papers* (Wendlebury and Glasgow: White Cockade and the Hunterian Art Gallery, 1990).
- 19 Christopher Dresser, *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufacturers* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1882), pp. 226, 261 and 212: figs. 102, 95 and 71.
- 20 Morse, p. 161, fig. 138.
- 21 Morse, p. 128, fig. 20.
- 22 See Mackintosh to Anna Muthesius, undated letter, (NHM, Mackintosh Charles R, 2505, Deutscher Werkbund Archiv, Berlin).
- 23 Eckart Muthesius, 'Thoughts on My Godfather', in Buchanan, p. 3.
- 24 See Andrew MacMillan, James Macaulay and William Buchanan, 'A Tour of the School', in Buchanan, p. 96.
- 25 Mackintosh, p. 30, quoted in Robertson, p. 60.
- 26 'An Experiment in the Application of Japanese Ornament to the Decoration of an English House', *The Studio* 17 (1899), p. 172.
- 27 On 13 March 1903, Mackintosh wrote to Muthesius, 'Nothing could give me more pleasure than to make the tour you suggest to Surrey to see some houses by Lutyens.' (NHM, Charles R Mackintosh 13 März 1903, Deutscher Werkbund Archiv, Berlin).